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Brittany Abdallah
St. Catherine University

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Best Practices for After-School Programming for Youth Identified as “At Risk”

Ages 8-14 Years Old

By

Brittany L. Abdallah, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
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St. Paul, MN
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

Committee Members
David Roseborough, Ph. D., LICSW, ACT (Chair)
Andre Crockett Senior
John Edmonds, LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University and St. Thomas University School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the University Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

“The goal is to show the kids something better. So most of the kids in the program who didn’t have the chance to be around a father figure or big brother figure that could show them a better or, ugh, achieve something in a good way instead of in a negative way or to get attention from someone. Letting them know that you don’t have to be out there selling drugs to make money alone, some people only know that lifestyle. It is our job to teach them the right way.”

Abstract

Previous studies have identified the time following the end of the school day as posing potential risks for youth who are not in programming or with a supportive adult. Youth lacking either may struggle with academic success and positive peer engagement. The purpose of this study was to explore some potential best practices in after school programming for youth who are deemed at risk, in order to support more interaction with and success in these programs designed, in part, to decrease risk. The principal investigator interviewed six participants who actively work with youth in after school programs, for youth between the ages of eight and fourteen, who have been identified as “at risk.” The interviews were then analyzed and coded. Initial themes emerged among all participants. The themes that were broadly recognized among interviewees included: defining at-risk, holding environments, and programming. These themes gave voice to the strengths and limitations within existing programming. Collectively the findings supported: relationship building, programming dynamics necessary to increase youth engagement, and looking at the holistic picture of the youth (i.e. self, family, school, work, and community). Implications are discussed as are suggestions for future research.

Policy makers have identified a vicious cycle of at-risk behaviors and poverty. Bodilly and Beckett (2005) identified “at-risk” as adolescents as those who experience economic hardship, social and emotional hardship and persistent stressors, which have accelerated the process of the at-risk criteria. Studies show that youth who are regularly monitored are significantly less likely to participate in delinquent behavior (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005), while youth who spend greater amounts of time socializing without supervision by adults are at increased risk for substance use and other antisocial behavior (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). Support for after-school programs stems, in part, from research indicating that the hours following release from school constitute high-risk periods of the day for children and adolescents. For example, most arrests for youth violence occur between the hours of 2 and 6 pm when a large group of young people are unsupervised by parents (Sickmund, M., Snyder, H. N., & Poe-Yamagata, E., 1997). Youth who have been considered at-risk have many barriers to overcome. They are often children who need additional support and engagement to build sustainable lifetime goals.

The literature points to a notable correlation between communities with high dropout rates and high crime rates. This, too, speaks to the importance of supervision and structure for youth. After-school programming is one potentially important source of such structure and support. This perhaps is especially important in communities with a higher percentage of crime, dropout rates, and identifiable concerns related to high risk factors associated with youth (Sickmund et al., 1997). For instance, authors such as Robert Putnam of Harvard University (2015) have pointed to the historical importance and current relevance of after-school programming, which has and continues to take many forms including after-school sports. Putnam, in particular, has pointed to the importance of helping adolescents to develop social and

other “soft” skills that carry forward into adulthood and correlates with things such as interpersonal abilities. After-school programming thus not only “fills time” and prevents crime, but may put youth in a more positive developmental trajectory, helping with things as powerful as exiting poverty and achieving upward economic mobility later in life.

As Putnam notes, after-school programming has been designed to and has taken many different forms. After-school programming will be defined, for the purpose of this paper as programming that supports independent learning, skill building, mentoring, and extra-curricular activities in after-school, non-school day programming. This study focuses on youth who have identified risk factors. For the purpose of this paper, “at-risk” will be defined as youth ages eight to fourteen years old, both female and male, and primarily children who receive a free and reduced lunch program. One key factor when thinking of youth identified as ‘at-risk’ is the possibility of children of color are over represented within this model based on research that provides data correlating poverty with overrepresentation among people of color. Others have written about the importance of factoring in the realities of things like historical trauma associated when understanding this overrepresentation.

Studying successful programs should offer the opportunity to better understand some of the core or central components in successful programming. Programs could benefit from a better understanding of “best practices” in effective after-school programs. This study explored how these models are defined and implemented and what seems particularly important, when working with different populations, genders, and age groups. An after-school programs need to address a broad array of dynamics within a community such as socio-economics, the gender, age, and ethnicity of its participants. Those offering or considering offering after-school programs could

potentially benefit by learning more about how the youth experience and benefit from these programs and the core components of successful programming.

The main goal of this study was thus to explore and identify both (1) some “best practices” within after-school programming, particularly programming offered for youth defined as “at-risk” and (2) to hear from some facilitators of successful programs about what is important, helpful, and beneficial to the youth they serve from their perspective. I focused in particular on after-school programs with a *recreational focus* as a particularly and potentially engaging format for youth in this age group. This study took the form of a series of case studies, by interviewing adult leaders at several formal after-school programs about what, from their perspective, makes these programs particularly effective and what they would recommend for other programs serving youth who are at-risk. I gave particular attention to the role of recreational and physical activity within those programs.

Literature Review

Youth have many different risk factors that can vary significantly by gender, socio-economics, and family dynamics. The following literature review sought to better understand youth who are sought out and deemed at-risk to provide a better sense of those who are considered candidates for after-school programming. A broader understanding of historical trauma is similarly explored in this section, as is some understanding of community interventions and a broader understanding of the ‘holding environment’ programs like these offer. I sought to understand how this framework/model can promote success within families and communities. The latter section gives attention to what best practices can be formulated from understanding and looking at examples of evidence-based programs. The literature emphasizes the importance of things like: attendance, quality in after school programs for the youth, and how the programs

can better engage adults such as coaches and teachers. Overall, this section will focus on providing a broader understanding of the youth's needs and alternative ways to reach them.

Defining 'At-Risk'

There are a number of factors that put children at-risk for not succeeding. Youth defined as "at risk" face challenges, including: poverty, poor health or nutrition, teen parenthood, homelessness, low self-esteem, drug or alcohol abuse, deficiency in the English language, lack of success in school, loss of hope for the future, and a lack of life goals (Anderson, 2008).

Research from Gilgun (1996) also suggests that risk factors such as shame can be a deterrent to positive outcomes within a stressful or adverse situation. John Edmonds, LICSW described that the majority of these risk factors associated with kids of color is based off historical trauma which cause outcomes that put kids of color at risk.

Many people pair the terms "troubled" and "youth" together as if it was a norm to say those two words in the same sentence. What constitutes the definition of "at-risk" youth then? Minnesota Statutes (2012) state that,

"at-risk children and youth are those that are under the age of 21 years old, enrolled in school or school dropouts, youth that failed in school, become pregnant, economically disadvantaged, children of drug or alcohol abusers, victims of physical, sexual or psychological abuse, have committed a violent or delinquent act, attempted suicide, experienced long-term physical pain due to injury, at risk of becoming or have become drug or alcohol abusers or chemically dependent, experienced homelessness, excluded or expelled from school, or have been adjudicated children in need of protection or services."

This label risks creating a “problem” for children from diverse circumstances. Kronick, (1998) argues that the meaning of at-risk needs to be clarified and re-conceptualized. Similarly, Conrath (1994) noted that negative labels are often destructive in that they lead the child through an experience where they may eventually become discouraged, defeated and finally, drop out of school. Woolfolk (1995) cautioned that applying a label, such as at-risk, can be harmful because a person is too complex to be described in only one or two words. The label itself misrepresents the person by becoming the focal point implying that this is the most important aspect of the person.

The National Association of Social Workers (2008) Code of Ethics lays the groundwork for the importance of working with youth who are disadvantaged or considered at-risk. The preamble to the code states that the social work profession focuses on “the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, 2008 para.1). Historical trauma contributes to the racial and ethnic disparities commonly experienced by people of color. “Historical trauma can be described as psychological and emotional consequences of the trauma experience that are transmitted to subsequent generations through physiological, environmental and social pathways resulting in an intergenerational cycle of trauma response” (as cited in: Sotero, 2006). Historical trauma contributes to the racial and ethnic disparities commonly experienced by people of color.

Many youth deemed at-risk live “day by day.” The founder of psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud formulated notions and spoke to the importance of the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind includes, thoughts, emotions, memories, desire, and motivations that are outside of our own awareness or perception (Cherry, 2015). If one thinks about youth who live in disenfranchised environments and the challenges

they face daily including poverty and the sense of being in survival mode, one can understand the challenges of living with a “day by day” orientation to life. Ruby Payne also speaks to this sense of ‘onerous’ on youth and families being blamed more than the other systematic responses to poverty, people of color, behavior, and education

As children transition into adolescence, one must understand the natural factors that are also put into play such as the changing body of a teenager, and the emotional ambivalence that the youth themselves are starting to be faced with not only from their environment but from within their own bodies. Young adolescents experience many physical, psychological, cognitive, and social changes; these changes can be stressful for young adolescents (Kingery & Erdley, 2007), in turn causing substantial stressors and risks for all children in this age range.

Adolescence is a developmentally critical period that constitutes peak times of victimization and perpetration, family conflict, unprecedented risky situations, and enormous cognitive and neurological changes (as cited in: Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). Behaviors in adolescence regarding school, substance use, and delinquent or violent behaviors can have substantial impact on adult outcomes such as relationships, educational attainment, and/or employment difficulties (Kwan, T., Liu, J., DuBow, M., Gros, P., & Pelletier, J. (2006). As programs find ways to include children and youth who are considered at-risk, community involvement along with strategies that incorporate a micro, macro, and mezzo framework have been identified as more holistic approaches. Gilgun (1996) elaborates that the research on resilience correlates with positive attachment figures and emotional responsiveness in prosocial role models develops resilience in children (pg. 853).

The Importance of the Holding Environment

Urie Brofenbrenner developed a model or approach that originally evaluated human development across all domains, also known as the holding environment. Brofenbrenner developed the ecological model that takes a look at a child in micro, macro, and mezzo contexts. Brofenbrenner described the model when he wrote,

“The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodations between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate setting in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger context within which the settings are embedded,” (as cited in: Rosa, E.M. & Tudge, J. (2013)).

Brofenbrenner’s approach to these domains collectively articulates any and all aspects related to a person’s environment shaping their processes. Similarly, when working with a client and exploring their holding environment an adult is essentially identifying all risk and protective factors associated within the individual, family, neighborhood, community, school, and overarching systems.

Paul Tough (2012) discussed in *How Children Succeed* the importance of supports within a family to be a changing factor in the majority of the children’s lives, “the most effective vehicle for improving children’s outcomes is not the school or the church or even the job centers; it is in the family,”(pg. 43). Resilience is described as “the capacity to maintain or regain adaptive functioning in the face of adverse conditions,” (Fraser & Terzian, 2005). Resilience as a process is how one overcomes that stressful life event that are an observable, quantifiable process, which is a way of dealing with the event in terms of thinking, understanding, and

behaving. Resilience can take the form of both internal and external resources that youth can use make use of.

Kronick (1997) wrote,

“Problems begin in the home. Children who come to school healthy, who have bonded with their family, who have participated in early childhood programs, and have had parents read to them are ready to learn and bond with the school. Children who do not have school readiness and or who exhibit unacceptable behavior need early assistance and early school success if the school’s goals of eventually graduation are to occur” (p. 298-299).

However, writers such as Payne remind us that problems do not take place in a “home” apart from a broader system that supports or works against the stability of one’s home and family.

This all raises the question of what the school, community and service providers are doing on the front end to support the youth in constructive activities to hinder the path of “at-risk” behaviors?

There are several different family, cultural, and systematic dynamics that can play a role in a youth being deemed at-risk. Interactions between child and parent or primary care-giver have a substantial amount of influence on the youth. Research shows that the mother-infant attachment plays a crucial role in formulating positive interactions and behaviors later in life.

John Bowlby’s research regarding attachment theory emphasizes the importance of the attachment system with children and more importantly with infants. Bowlby reports,

“Attachment behavior is organized by the attachment system,” (Ainsworth, 1985; pg. 774).

Ainsworth (1985) elaborates on attachment theory and how attachment is relayed through fundamental systems that underlay reproductive behavior, parental behavior, feeding and exploratory behavior. These behaviors are learned through three different phases. The first phase is learned through an infant’s experience of a parent. The second phase generalizes this

experience through the infant and interactions with different caregivers. The third phase is a “working model” of the overall attachment learned within the first year. This internal working model represents the physical environment of attachment figures already formulated in the child itself.

After-School Programming as a Holding Environment

According to Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990), not all programs or techniques are effective if not in the company of one key ingredient, which is the quality of human relationships. “Research shows that the quality of human relationships in schools and youth service programs may be more influential than the specific techniques or interventions employed” (p. 58). Youth who are participants of after school programs frequently receive greater emotional and developmental support in after-school settings than they do in traditional school settings (Kahne, J., Nagaoka, J., Brown, A., O'BRIEN, J. A. M. E. S., Quinn, T., & Thiede, K. (2001). Therefore, the involvement and participation of the after-school program to promote and introduce positive relationships benefit not only the youth, but the community as a whole.

Communities are often measured by their school system's dropout rates, unemployment and crime rates, and by the family incomes within the community. The goal of most educators is to serve the students by educating them. Serving students in this respect is much like serving the community at large (Alspaugh, 1998). In the same way, Van Den Heuvel (1990) said, “Insuring the success of families and children is the only insurance policy for our economic and cultural future.” Van Den Heuvel (1990) describes our communities as the source of our well-being, similar to the saying, “if my community is profiting well, then I am profiting well.” (as cited in Kronick 1997).

Before change can occur in many community settings and most importantly in the youth's environment, it is important to understand the lives of the youth, understanding and accepting a diversity of populations within the school system and in the youth's life. Cooperation and a desire to involve oneself in a unified building process can be a rewarding experience (Conrath, 1994). Reavis et al. (1999) stated, "At each level, one individual's or group's passion and clarity of vision can lead others to the vision on their own," (pg. 17). It is important to think of youth as individuals. That is, every program and every approach will not work with all the children in our communities. The National Commission of Children stated, "All schools and communities (should) reevaluate the services that they currently offer and design creative multidisciplinary initiatives to help children with serious or multiple needs reach their academic potential" (Lawson & Anderson: cited in Kronick, 1997, p. 317).

Often, afterschool programs are offered in low income neighborhood to enable youth to access academic support services and participate in recreational enrichment activities commonly afforded to their wealthier peers (Halpern, 1999); moreover, the evidence suggest that after school programs are most beneficial for youth experiencing academic difficulties or for youth with common developmental problems (Greenberg, 2004). Youth have the major of stress resulting from school work and their engagement with peers within the school systems. Much of the school setting revolves around teacher expectations and outcomes of the children. Youth who are put into this environment may struggle if their home life does not revolve around or afford the same goals. The Boys and Girls Club can be thought of as a prime example of a successful afterschool program offered often in low income neighborhoods.

Moreover, youth who attend after-school programs often achieve better rates of school attendance, higher reading achievement scores, and elicit greater teacher expectancy of student

success than at-risk youth who do not attend after-school services (Durlak and Weissberg 2007; Fabiano et al. 2005; Fashola and Cooper 1999; LoSciuto et al. 1999; Mahoney et al. 2005).

More importantly, some afterschool programs have demonstrated positive long term effects on academic achievement during high school and college, creating less stress in those individuals lives and ways for them to cope with the stress during the ‘vulnerable stage’ (as cited in Zand, Thomson, Cervantes, Espiritu, Klagholz, LaBlanc, Taylor; 2009).

Components of Successful Programming

Literature offers substantial evidence that after-school programming supports youth who face the obstacle of being at-risk in learning new skills, building friendships, and the ability of the youth to create and achieve their goals through ongoing mentorship and engagement from peers and adults (Zand et al., 2009). There are several different frameworks associated with mentoring that have been tried in the after-school settings described as “best practice” opportunities for youth considered at-risk (Zand et al., 2009). Also, program quality and development can correlate to core components that have been identified in the literature, in order to speak to this study’s central question: what are the best practices in working with at-risk youth in after-school programming?

What is known about evidence-based practice is that there are many different ways of learning how to effectively use a theory that works with individuals or families. Rosenthal (2006), reported,

“Evidence based practice is a clinical intervention for a specific problem that has been (a) evaluated, (b) published, and (c) consistently found to be effective.”

The goal of evidence based practice and similarly frameworks is to look at programs which have been used over time and tested, and have been found effective. Moreover, evidence based

practice has used a systematic approach to collectively define the outcome of numerous theories or approaches.

Mentoring programs provide great opportunities for youth in disadvantaged situations to learn and grow in a positive environment. Core programming goals associated with mentoring youth are to increase positive impacts in school-based functioning, familial relationships, extra-familial relationships, and life skills (Zand, et al, 2009). These programs generally involve the experience of having a mentor. There are several different approaches to matching youth with a possible mentor. The literature provides some information related to pairing youth with a nurturing, capable non-parental adult with qualities that match similar interest and respect between both mentor and mentee. Rutter (1987) described the importance of these relationship when he wrote:

“Several protective processes that reduced the impact of risk, promoted self-esteem and self-efficacy, minimized negative chain reactions, and opened up opportunities. More recently, others have attempted to describe the explicit pathways of influence at work when youth develop meaningful relationship with mentors” (Keller, 2005; Rhondes, 2002, 2005).

Soski and Godshalk (2000) gathered data associated with same-gender matches regarding mentor and mentee participants in after school programming. Their research provided information to support the importance of such relationships, pointing to such pairings as important in offering an authentic counseling service, and overall moral support between same-gender mentor and mentee participants. The research concluded that the same sex pairing method in after-school programs helped support the youth and mentor in building a stronger relationship.

Cultural/ethnic importance.

While mentoring is a widely researched tool when working with youth in after school programming, additional programming such as skill building has also been widely researched. Literature suggests many different methods related to skill building that increase positive outcomes for children when learning is achieved. Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills engage youth in understanding and help youth to identify self-awareness and self-management skills along with social awareness and social relationship. With practice, these evidence-based research models support responsible decision-making skills in youth (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger; 2009). Durlak et al. (2009) note,

“We examined outcomes in three general areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance. Positive outcomes have been obtained in these three areas for school-based SEL interactions that start youth’s personal and social skills.”

Youth learn and grow at different rates and in unique styles. Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) noted that youth/young people often learn best by doing, hence the success of mentorship programs with youth that involve an activity component.

Intervention and programming must and should vary widely, being always able to adapt and modify as the youth demonstrate engagement or dis-engagement (Bodilly and Beckett, 2005; Halpern 1999); however, literature suggests that structured programs are more effective than unstructured socialization or recreation approaches (Durlak and Weissberg 2007). Skill training and character development strategies are also important components of effective after-school programs (Gottfredson et al. 2004).

Goplerund, 1991, (cited in Kronick, 1997) identified and recommended effective intervention program management as utilizing program resources, addressing student needs,

having a variety of intervention strategies readily available, flexibility, limiting the red tape, providing personal attention to at-risk students, demonstrating equality among ethnic/racial groups, promoting early intervention, the use of mentors, getting parents involved, and knowing that each student is their own person. Therefore, the expectations placed on individual students should be harmonious with the needs of that student. Another component of programs geared toward youth with high risk factors, according to Kugler (2001) is community service, which is a critical element that can be a particularly effective way of linking high school students with school and community and connecting basic skills learning with the real-world needs or such skills. According to Durlak and Weissberg (2007), youth who participated in after-school programs demonstrated considerable improvement in feelings and attitudes, behavior adjustment including prosocial behaviors and reduced aggressive behavior, and improved academic and achievement test scores.

Active learning styles require the youth to engage through role play in the material they learn. Programming that reflects active learning styles, where youth are able to not only learn material but use it by role playing or through social interactions usually attain mastery in a skill much faster than a program that does not support active learning (Durlak, 1997). After school programs have the ability to implement physical activity into programming to support active learning in engaging in skills and promote physical well-being. Research suggests that physical activity helps promote and preserve executive functioning and achievement in youth (Davis, Tomporowski, McDowell, Austin, Miller, Yanasak, Allison, Naglieri; 2011).

Recreational Engagement

Recreational aspirations in programming promote executive functioning in the brain to achieve goals, planning and carrying out actions, attention and memory, response, self-control,

self-monitoring, and the use of strategies (Davis et al., 2011). Research in the literature noted that children who utilize physical activity daily achieve higher academic success. It has also been noted in Ratey's book "Spark", that physical activity produces higher academic success. In turn physical activity in after school programming is vital to at risk youth which promotes not only social interactions, sportsmanship, and team work efforts, but also to engage the executive functions of the most important "muscle" in the human body: the brain.

Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this paper the *Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS)* model along with the framework within *How Children Succeed* was used to analyze the data in this study. Fifteen years ago Dr. Ross Greene published a book called *The Explosive Child* where the primary focus of change was on the parenting styles. However, since the publishing of that book, not only parents have been using the CPS model. This model has been implemented in treatment facilities, schools, and juvenile detention centers to support children with social, emotional, and behavioral limitations. Dr. Greene published another book to incorporate a larger number of populations, providers, and families in understanding and utilizing the CPS model. *Lost At School* by Dr. Greene, provides a continuum of care and collaborative approach for school officials to join with parents and community members in order to better support and understand the implementation of a supportive framework for children who struggle in school. The framework used within *How Children Succeed* by Paul Tough, utilizes grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character to motivate, inspire, and succeed to make a change in 'our' children.

The CPS model emphasizes working collaboratively (with parents and other adults) toward the common goal of preventative measures to decrease behaviors for the youth in a more effective manner. Greene (2014) noted there needs to be a common shift among providers and

parents for a congruent approach that is effective in the youth mastering skills to decrease or eliminate behaviors. These three approaches are described as:

“(1) a dramatic improvement in understand these factors that set the stage for challenging behaviors in kids; (2) creating mechanisms for helping these kids that are predominantly proactive instead of reactive; and (3) creating processes so people can solve problems collaboratively.” (pg. xiv)

Within this model it is clearly defined that behavioral challenges in children often result from children lacking important thinking skills. The model focuses on the use of proactive interventions rather than reactive approaches to a child with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. After-school programming offers one such example of a proactive intervention with implications with the goal of supporting positive, prosocial behaviors and skill building, while at the same time decreasing risks associated with things like a lack of supervision at a high-risk time (after school hours).

From the perspective of Greene (2014), behavioral challenges arise in children primarily due to the incapacity of the child being able to demonstrate the task. Greene (2014) describes behavioral outburst as a child’s inability to regulate emotions, consider appropriate outcomes, understanding how behavior affects everyone, or to use words to let others know when something is wrong, and responding to a change in plans in a flexible manner. Greene goes on to describe these children struggle to master skills required to successfully handle social, emotional and behavioral challenges, which similarly can contribute to these children having development delays. The CPS model states the importance of children mastering skills to decrease behavior, becoming proactive in the solutions. Again, after-school programs offer another important potential venue in which youth can learn these skills: from adults and from peers.

“Understanding why a child is challenging is the first and most important part of helping them,” (Greene, 2014). Identifying what lagging skills the youth or child are demonstrating can help to associate the reason for the ongoing behaviors. Greene (2014) provides a tool (his model) that can help parents, teachers, and case managers identify the lagging skills and possible unsolved problems. The Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP) acts as a discussion guide to help adults identify the lagging skills rather than the behaviors that are caused by the lagging skills.

The ALSUP is a tool that acts as a collaborative effort with the child and the providers/parents to identify an unsolved problem. This model helps identify key challenges in the youth to identify possible exhibited behaviors. When talking about skills a child lacks and problem behaviors associated to those lagging skills it can be difficult for children to process. Greene, discussing the importance for empathy during these hard discussions. Much of the CPS model supports the idea that children have difficult behaviors due to skills that have not been mastered. Providers, parents, teachers, and mentors can help to correct challenging behaviors with consequences; however Greene (2014) noted,

“Natural consequences are effective at reducing the challenging behavior of some kids, but, in my experience, not the kids referenced in this book (children with social, emotional and behavioral challenges),” (pg. 39).

After-school programming can provide these opportunities as well.

This model and perspective as one that I believe can offer some insight to help interpret and to understand some of the things I anticipated adults in after-school programming roles would describe as helpful to youth, particularly in the area of helping youth to learn social and “soft” skills. I expected that Greene’s concepts of challenging behaviors resulting from lagging

skills, lagging skills setting the stage for challenging behaviors, and identifying with the child the skills that are lacking can be an important step in decreasing behaviors and supporting continued growth for the child will be particularly helpful in understanding the qualitative data I review. Lastly, it will have relevance in that many of the youth referred to or involved in these groups have likely been referred due to an identification of “problematic behaviors” as young people labeled as at risk.

Method

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore and to better understand what best practices can be implemented in after school programs for youth who are ‘labeled’ at-risk. What can best describe the curriculum, activities and overall success of a program when serving youth ages 8 to 14 years old, particularly for those programs using an athletic or activity-based central component? Literature points to different curricula for after school programming with a broad array of core components utilized across settings. Further research related to after-school programming needs to be explored to define what best practices can be used to determine and assist the youth who attend an after-school program. Further discussion is needed in terms of what skills, both hard and soft, need to be supported, nurtured, and “taught” in the programs. This study utilized a qualitative research design to better understand after-school programming best practices and what can be implemented within these programs to engage and collaborate with the youth who attend. Best practices can be defined as a consensus-based model or “expert consensus” about “what works” in such programs. I have interviewed a number of staff and administrators of these programs to better understand their impressions about the components of effective programming in serving this age group, and those labeled as “at risk.”

Sample and Population

The population the study attempts to describe is that of youth deemed at-risk, ages eight to fourteen, regionally, who participate in or who might benefit from recreation-based afterschool programming. I chose ages eight to fourteen because this represents an age range during which, developmentally, youth are able to begin to be left at home for up to three hours, unsupervised, and thus represent an age at which risks associated with a lack of supervision emerge as represented by Olmsted County Child and Family Services' developmental assessment. The range extended to fourteen or at least around fourteen due to middle school children entering high school where recreational activities and sports are more commonly offered.

The study sample consisted of five professionals who work with youth in four or more after-school settings. The professionals selected for this study were currently working with or had worked with youth in various after-school programs within their community. Communities sampled include Rochester, Minnesota and urban Chicago, Illinois. Some of the professionals have worked directly with the youth, and some were the program managers or administrators of the after school program. Youth who participate in these programs, though desirable to sample, were not interviewed due to the pilot nature of this study and due to the complexities of getting consents. I see these youth and their parents as a potentially difficult to reach population. Participants were selected by utilizing the purposive sampling method. Miles and Huberman (1994) described purposive sampling as,

“Strategies designed to enhance understanding of a selected individual or groups experience for developing theories and concepts. Researchers seek to accomplish this

goal by selecting “information rich” individuals, groups, organizations, or behaviors that provide the greatest insight into the research question.” (p. 264).

All professional participants that were invited to participate, based on their exposure to and commitment in after-school programming. Three of the sites offer a recreational emphasis. The fourth served as a point of comparison and is a more education-based and traditional after-school program.

Protection of Human Participants

To ensure protection of human rights the participants in this study were provided an informed consent form (see Appendix B) developed and reviewed with all participants prior to the beginning of the interviewing process. The informed consent explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and the methods used to gather data within the study (refer to attachment/appendix A). The informed consent was developed through a template provided by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and was reviewed by the research committee and approved. For the purpose of this paper and this study the research committee consists of John Edmonds, LICSW, Andre Crockett, and David Roseborough, Ph. D, LICSW. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were provided the opportunity to ask questions after the form was reviewed, and agreed to the information laid out in the informed consent. Interviewees were asked to sign and date the consent form. The researcher kept the consent forms in a locked file drawer in researcher’s home where they will be located for three years, as required by federal law.

Data Collection

A qualitative research design was utilized in gathering data from participants throughout the interviewing process. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set

of questions that were approved by the research committee and Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). The questions were designed to help facilitate a broader understanding of what best practices can be utilized and found in after-school programming to support youth who are at-risk. The questions formulated were open ended, with the goal of achieving a better understanding of programming for youth who are at-risk. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; the interviews lasted from thirty minutes up to one hour and six minutes.

Questions were developed based on the information or lack of information within the literature review that this researcher thought was significant in the understanding of the after-school programs and their potential contributions to youth in this age group. The interview questions looked at asking broadly about things such as: the role of the interviewee and their involvement with after-school programming. The remaining questions focused on asking for more information related to their knowledge about after-school programming modules, dynamics that can promote program success, and about their understanding of what best practices can be utilized to promote program success in after-school programming, particularly for programs with a recreational focus. The questions were used to guide the interview, and bring more understanding to current practices used within these agencies.

Data Analysis

I used a three-part data analysis strategy. I have coded the data on three levels. First, I used open coding. This means I simply reviewed the transcripts for ideas that emerged from the respondents, apart from any theoretical or interpretive lens. I wanted to hear from them “in their own words.” Second, I used something called “selective coding.” This means I went back to the data and listened for relevant themes discussed either in (1) the literature and/or (2) conceptual framework. For example, I was listening for ideas such as: the importance of mentorship, a

positive environment, recreation and physical activity, and “soft skills.” Soft skills can be understood as relational, as social skills that carry forward into adult life (Putnam, 2015). Third, I have used what I found in order to see what the data might suggest in relation to best practices, compared to what other programs might consider doing similarly.

Strengths and Limitations

Within this research, I have explored and interviewed sites that primarily have a recreational-based program. However, to strengthen the findings from the literature section I added a site that has a traditional focus without the recreational component. This was done in order to aid as a point of comparison. Also, interviewing multiple sites within the regional area has supported the research in providing possibly different aspects when it comes to programming and best practices when serving youth at-risk in after school programming. Due to the timeline provided for the research one limitation has been the inability to hear from the youth directly, which would have provided a broader understanding of what they see as best practices and important experiences gained from the programs sampled.

Time Line

This proposal was reviewed and approved by the committee members in late December, 2015. Once the approval from all participants on the committee was completed, the IRB application was submitted for review to the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board. All modifications were completed for the IRB and resubmitted for approval. After resubmission the IRB granted approval to start the research. Then the agencies identified to participate in this research study were contacted. After contacting the agencies and their approval to move forward, I met with each individual interviewee. We reviewed the consent form and each adult signed. Interviews were conducted with agencies in January. The interviews were

transcribed for coding and thematic analysis. Once the written transcripts were interpreted, a write up of the results and discussions section occurred by March of 2016. Once the results and discussions sections were finalized, the committee met again in April of 2016, in preparation of the presentation of the research findings on May 16th, 2016 at the University of St. Thomas.

Findings

For the purpose of this paper questions were asked to professionals who work with youth deemed at-risk to gain a broader understanding of “best practices” when working with youth ages eight to fourteen, who have been labeled at-risk and are involved in after-school programming, most notably programs that have a recreational component to them. The following questions were asked to gather more demographic information on the programs such as: (1) tell me about your program and a bit about who you serve; (2) what does your program focus on, what goals do you aim to achieve with the youth? Another group of questions gathered more data about the best practices noted during programming such as: (4) what often leads the youth to engage in the program, and (b) as you think about the role of mentoring, how important is it that mentors and youth share the same (i) gender, (ii) race or ethnicity, (c) how important is what happens between the youth (vs. youth and adult leaders). The last group of questions emphasized programming that addresses the needs of the community such as: (5) what do you see a barriers for youth to participate in programming, and (b) as you think of this program and other similar programs, what are the common unmet needs we should be considering? The method used in this research study was purposeful sampling; five professionals responded to the email and agreed to participate in an interview ranging from 30 minutes to a little over one hour.

The study sample consisted of five professionals who work with youth in four after-school settings. The professionals selected for this study were currently working with or have

worked with youth in various after-school programs. Three of the sites offer a recreational emphasis. The fourth served as a point of comparison and as a more education-based and traditional after-school program. Based on the timeline of this research study, there were significant barriers to including youth in this sampling method, therefore the youth have not been included in this research.

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. Based on the transcriptions I used a three-part data analysis strategy, using: (1) open coding; (2) selective coding; (3) and coding materials to gather data around best practices between the programs interviewed. These coding methods were used to interpret the data for this research study, to then to develop themes.

When utilizing the open coding method there were three significant themes that emerged: (1) primarily youth that are being served are those of color or of minority status; (2) programming success includes mentorship and building relationships as a solid foundation with the youth; (3) all programming aims to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, school drop outs, and incarceration. Within these themes there were subthemes that emerged. Under youth who are served, respondents spoke to youth of color or of minority status a subtheme and (a) historical trauma, and (b) institutional racism were significantly reoccurring subthemes. Within mentoring and relationship building there were two subthemes such as, (a) youth engaging in mentee and mentoring programming, and (b) building that “one lasting relationship” with the youth. Within the theme of breaking the cycle three subthemes emerged that were found effective in programming such as, (a) continued education and support, (b) recreational engagement, and (c) community unity/engagement. Figures One, Two, and Three display the main themes along with their sub themes.

Figure One: Identified youth and their barriers.

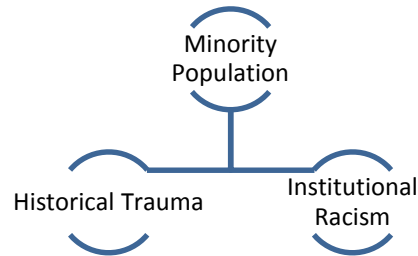


Figure Two: Collective approach of working with youth

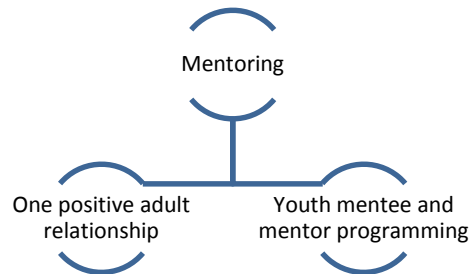
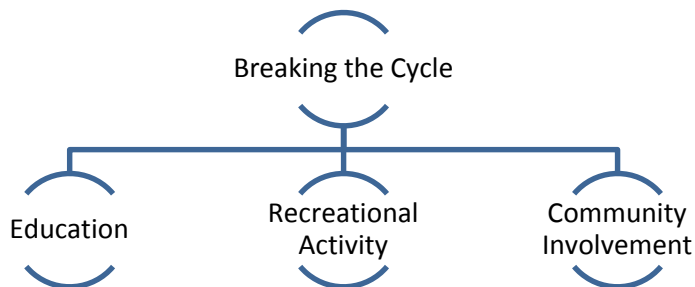


Figure Three: Breaking the cycle to intergenerational families



Themes of After-School Programming for Youth 8-14 years olds

Theme One: Targeted participants in programming

Participants were asked a series of questions that collectively gathered data related to the targeted programming population. When asked the question about programming and about what participants were served in programming, all participants reported working with youth who have high risk factors and would consider them at-risk of social service or correctional involvement, primarily youth who are of color or of a minority status. One participant emphasized the rationale around selecting youth of color as an automatic inclusion for services.

“Our program focuses on youth of color.... Anybody that is not white essentially.”

When asked the question of, “do you work with youth who are identified as at-risk or who exhibit behavioral challenges,” all participants responded yes. Programming in each of these areas was very different across programs; however, there were similarities as well, which focused on the disparities that youth of color or of minority status are faced with every day. One participant shared,

“One of the overarching concepts in the program is to respond to the issues of disproportionality affecting kids of color, particularly, African-American kids... The rationale behind that is, the data tells us that kids of color, again, particularly African Americans and Native Americans have um, negative educational outcomes, the likelihood of those things happening are high, whether that’s graduation rates, expulsion, and imposition of discipline. Those kinds of things happen at a higher rate or lower in the sense of graduation rates for kids of color, most notably African Americans and Native Americans.”

Another participant shared what at-risk and high risk means in their programming,

“We work with kids that are at high risk more than those that are at-risk. Currently most of our kids are in that category, kids that are in high risk are those that are in our system, who have high suspension rates, gang affiliate, and out of home placement.”

Throughout all programming there were themes that emerged in which respondents talked a little more about the disproportionalities that kids of color or those of minority status have to face at such young ages. These subthemes included historical trauma and institutional racism.

Subtheme One: Historical Trauma on youth of color and of minority status

Working with youth, particularly those of color, had an over-arching theme of the disproportionalities they are faced with. These struggles are often seen as an after-effect from when slavery took place, particularly in the United states. Race continues to be a very sensitive topic for many people, organizations, or groups to talk about. However, this theme was discussed numerous times by the participants, and often what they see when working with youth of color.

One participant shared a story of a youth who was in programming and the challenges the youth face, even while they were attending school.

“An example of historical trauma and bias happened today. A kid didn’t have a pencil. The teacher started to have an attitude and get on the kid because he didn’t have a pencil. The teacher kept on to the student asking why he didn’t come to school equipped and ready, kept on, kept on. Well then the student started yelling at the teacher (swearing). So then that’s a discipline report. So the thing was, so could that have been handled differently. So we talked about that in the context of historical trauma. If the teacher would have some insight into what baggage that kid was bringing into school, they may not have responded to the student in that way, the teacher might have just handed the student a pencil and say here. You know those are examples of how that could have played out. And the likelihood that, that teacher’s response would have been different if that student was white.”

Another participant noted the everyday struggles African Americans have to overcome just by passing people in the streets, going to interviews, and even in the schools.

“Primarily people look at us and judge us by the way we dress and the way we look. It’s so typical for a black man to be judged, because their shoes and pants look different. Many stereotypes relate us to gang members or bum.”

The participant went on throughout the interview and discussed that the judgement upon African Americans is often demobilizing. The participant shared a story of a time when he was walking to school at the age of 13 and was stopped by the police. The police handcuffed him and took him into the jail. He was right in front of the school. The participant reporting going in a line-up due to the way a victim described his nose. After he was let go, he then had troubles going to school in fear that he would again, be judged for the way he looked. Not only is there the historical trauma from when slavery occurred against African Americans or when lands were taken from the Native Americans, youth of color continue to be judged within institutions.

Subtheme Two: Institutional Racism for youth of color and of minority status

Many participants described the understanding and overarching struggles that youth of color and even adults of color have to face. These struggles are not because there is lack of

housing or children are not getting their education, it's because of the system itself. The systems seems to set these children up to fail, creating false images and assumptions of them based on their cultural upbringing. Institutional racism is prevalent in today's society for many people of color. When asked to elaborate on what institutional racism was, one participant described it as,

“We are dealing with this today... In the school system and what the report showed was that African-American children were about, were more likely to be the recipient of harsh discipline in the school. Whether that would be suspended, out of school, or um, in-school suspension; but that those were applied un-evenly. And that is institutional, cause anytime you start getting into this, as the essence of disproportionality and is disparity, so you have to treat it as a set of rules that are applied differently to a particular group.”

Another participant explained how there are different regulations and rules in programming, however, it affects different cultural groups differently such as:

“Every institution has rules, but within those rules there are discretion... So if you apply the rules of Child Support to people who are already generationally condemned to poverty. Then you start locking people up because they have to pay child support, well what you have done is dislocated the family, you've torn them apart, then you have put the fathers job in jeopardy, so that just perpetuates the system. You know, those are institutional insults to families.”

Finally, a broader and more defined understanding of what specifically in the schools, at an institutional level has been identify,

“In terms of the achievement gaps you will find an underrepresentation in classes such as AP or honors classes, or an overrepresentation in suspensions, expulsions. It always comes back to race. And so we have to start looking at what is happening on an institutional level.”

It is clear through reading what the participants shared, that institutional racism is perceived as prevalent in society today. This creates a barrier for many youth of color and the services they are provided. From the perspective of the interviewees, most often it is not the youth who create barriers for themselves, but the system and programming that does not model to fit their needs.

Theme Two: Best Practices on engagement with youth in programming

The second main theme found in the data was that of what best practices are used in the programs to support engagement and change in youth of color and youth who are deemed at-risk. With the majority of the participants describing several components they have seen in programming to be successful, they all correlated and described mentoring or mentorship along with relationship building to be the most beneficial practice used and effective when working with youth of color or deemed at risk. One participant described:

“Some of the kids don’t have social supports and positive influences in programming is a way to get that for them, other kids might be, getting them involved in leadership is a very positive thing, because for many kids they have never been asked to take a leadership role so giving that enhances their self-esteem. It also gives them opportunity to work on issues with kids. I mean some kids have, whatever their own personality issues are such as difficulties interacting with peers, so it’s a good way to, good laboratory to do that cause you have that staff who are attuned to that and can focus on that and help kids make connections with other kids.”

Another participant elaborated on the power of working with youth and bringing their voice to the table to truly empower them in programming,

“YPQA, Youth Programming Quality Assurance, which is research based... It details out the involvement in youth to actually planning and decision making. So we utilize those principles and staff utilize the principles in how they organize and do work with the youth... The youth plan the monthly activities, working individually.”

Another participant also shared that youth involvement and leadership supports continued engagement and best practices in programming:

“Having a successful model that will bring the kids out of their current circumstances. What I mean by that is that not only a person that works with the kids, but someone that works with the parents, the school district, and the county, to have wraparound services. So what I mean is like unlike other programs we act as an advocate. We go to parent teacher conferences, we inside the schools so if something happens we are the first person that they contact. The police call us, they do community service for us. And so we also in contact with the kids in some way and somehow to prevent them from, uh, some of the negative influences and behaviors.”

In another interview it was also brought up that programming has a huge influence on the example that not only that program displays, but also who is a part of programming makes a huge difference:

“I believe that a good quality program has a high quality coach teaching in it. And so what you see is that, most programs fail at and traditional programs is that, you got young college students running it, and so you wouldn’t put an unlicensed person in the school district or as a school teacher to work with kids like that, but yet you go to after-school programs every day that is not qualified to work with them. So I would like to see those workers have a license, cultural certificates, and that means that you will need to increase the wages of those that work with youth, if we are truly going to maximize and have these kids be successful.”

As the participant noted above that program success and best practice should be level in all fields along with the education and experience of workers working with complex youth. Another participant described the importance for wraparound services for the youth participating in programming to best support their needs,

“Having daily contact, outside of the traditional settings. Kids have break downs on the weekends, break downs in the middle of the night. Kids are going to ask questions of making critical life decisions. Someone to counsel them, someone to give them wise counsel.”

The common thread and trend within the theme of best practices was also just being able to relate to the youth, going out of the staff’s way to grab the youth’s attention and to foster them into a successful life. Two participants shared,

“We went out there and got them. So, we went out and seen them in groups on the corner, and conversated, with them, told them to get into a better activity, or tried to get them involved in something better...It was a way for those that did come, a way for them to get out of the streets, so them are the ones that actually showed up. Those that disengaged from the streets or detached themselves from the gang related activities were the ones who wanted to show up.”

“Being real with the kids makes an impact, several years went by and when I seen them again, they came up to me and thanked me for coming to them, mentoring them, having faith in them, even through the hard times. Now I call that success”

Overall, successful programming starts by building a relationship with the youth and mentoring them to help the youth get through their struggles and come out victorious.

Subtheme One: Mentee and Mentoring programming styles

All participants discussed in multiple areas within their interviews the power of one to one and team mentoring and coaching. One barrier that was elaborated on was the fact that often times it is hard to find an adult black male to engage in programming, particularly youth programming. Participants shared their struggles with youth to staff ratios and to find mentors who are of the same color or ethnicity as the youth. Several participants noted the importance for youth, particularly, youth of color to be paired with a mentor of the same color or ethnicity. One participant shared:

“It’s very important that the mentor and mentee looks like the kids. Not only looks like the kids but able to identify with the kids and also help the kid navigate some of the youth’s issues. Because sometimes a person can look like a kid and not identify and vice versa. I think they need both. Personality and being able to build relationships. I think the kid still needs a person that looks like him and identifies with him, also, someone of another race too, because they can teach them how to navigate the system.”

Another participant shared the same beliefs of pairing youth with those that look and understand the youth’s situations.

“Culture does support a better connection for the youth and the mentee. To be able to pair a young black man with an older black man allows the kids to really understand that they are not the only ones going through certain situations. Many times being young and being black seems unfair and for someone to have experience that can help mentor a younger person through that struggle makes it so much easier for the youth.”

Another participant also supported the same views of mentors and mentees of the same color be paired:

“I think it’s extremely important. Gender might not be an issue, I mean gender depending on the kids might be an issue, might not be an issue. But I think that there, because of the environment, because of the community, because of the kids in the program they don’t

see role models of color in the schools. So for them to be connected to adults, the staff of color is in itself a benefit.”

Along with pairing mentors and mentees culturally, one participant discussed and provided great deal around peer mentorship:

“Mentoring is not only successful when you pair a youth with an adult, it’s also successful when you have peers mentoring each other. Peer mentoring helps build relationships with others and adult to youth mentoring helps provider the youth with a higher understanding of life.”

That same participant continued to elaborate on why peer mentorship is successful in their programming and with the youth they support:

“We stagger the mentors... We have the mentors involved in recruiting the new mentors, and so we use the students themselves as a recruitment tool, because they know, they have those connections, those peer connections, but they also know who wouldn’t be appropriate and they will say that, so and so, would not be a good candidate because they are not truly committed. So it’s truly kept and built on their recommendations and recruitment efforts.”

As noted above in theme two’s best practice when working with youth, particularity, those at risk or high risk, one participant explained the role and importance the youth have in programming and how their input matters, the youth become leaders themselves, they advocate for the program and want to provide the opportunity of others to succeed, the participant shared,

“One of the mentorship programs...has a similar mission to it, which is, those mentors who mentor younger students, ultimately graduate high school and go onto post-secondary, and our record over the course of 10 years, is that ultimately every mentor we’ve had, has gone onto post-secondary. And that lends credence and provides proof to the idea that if you provide supports to kids, even kids who may be coming out of poverty or other kinds of unstable living situations that they can in fact, succeed.”

Another participant discussed the importance that the mentors in their programming have on the families and youth they work with. This participant shared the amount of training and knowledge

that goes into programming prior to matching mentors so they can make sure that culture, wellness, and overall needs of the youth and family are being met:

“The faith component, it’s called the Christo-centric program, for us it’s Christ being the center of the program, that’s the faith piece. With that, participants have access to a mentor, we call them life coaches. The mentors will have completed a training through the Y-Mentor training, they will have completed a health and wellness training, and so the reason for that is were working with high risk youth that are, who have, or are likely to be affected by poverty.”

Subtheme Two: One caring adult in a child’s life

Participants all agreed that in order to make a lasting change in a youth’s life, there needs to be a good relationship between the teacher, coach, mentor, or anyone else to really support that youth.

“I think one reason they keep coming back is that it’s relationship driven, second things is, that most of them are interested in sports.”

A common theme in mentoring was that the relationship between the mentor and the mentee needs to be mutual, needs to be positive, or else it becomes very difficult to engage the youth and their family. One participant described their program and the success they have had in programming based off the ability to really build lasting relationships with the youth,

“I think one thing we excel in and do best, is build relationships. Not only with the kids but with the parents, the schools, the communities, having that wrap-around services to support the kids and have them be successful. So they can be successful in school, and out of school... We don’t focus too much on education, most of our kids have high behaviors, so what we focus on is or what we concentrate on is how to we eliminate some of those behavior barriers that will cause them to get suspended, that will cause them to be incarcerated. Relationship base.”

Another participant shared the same views of relationship building as important factor in programming, but elaborates on programming truly being an all-encompassing effort in the schools, at home, in the communities, to fully support the youth,

“I think that the mentor and the mentee’s ability to relate is beyond important, just talking about sports and things like that. What we do is try to use mentors that are highly successful in the community...Because many kids that we deal with ideally become first generation college students so someone seeing someone that has already graduated college like them, aspire them to one day also graduate college, but also that graduating from college can also get you a good job... Our mentors are the ones that take the kids on sports tours. Our mentors are the ones that go and take them to activities such as, the Black Museum, and they get the chance to experience the cultural events together, where here in Rochester, they don’t get that opportunity.”

Finally, one participant explained the dynamic of a positive, nurturing, supportive relationship with the youth and what it should be about, starting where the youth are, then supporting their growth from there,

“The goal is to show the kids something better. So most of the kids in the program who didn’t have the chance to be around a father figure or big brother figure that could show them a better or, ugh, achieve something in a good way instead of in a negative way or to get attention from someone. Letting them know that you don’t have to be out there selling drugs to make money alone, some people only know that lifestyle. It is our job to teach them the right way.”

Theme Three: Breaking the intergenerational cycle with youth

In theme three, the participants cited, numerous times the aspect of breaking the cycle for the youth, changing their views of the street life, the struggle and intern giving the youth alternative ways to be successful while being positive community members. One barrier that the participants shared was the fact that programming in the community does not always meet the needs of the youth, especially, those of color or of minority status:

“Most of our programming we have in the community are traditional, but we are dealing with nontraditional students. Researchers saw that the demography that we work with, especially, African American males are not permitted to go to the majority of your after school programs, primarily because of the behaviors and academic failures. Because it’s really hard to get the outcome and data you need working with that population.”

Often times the participants stated that youth who are at-risk struggle with staying out of the streets as they get involved in gang and drug’s in their early teen years,

“Some of them come from the streets at a young age, 13 or 14, and so their mindset is already, just, gang related, everything is about gang related...Most often if you have someone coming from a different, set, different block and your trying to bring them into the program, what you need to understand is that we all brothers, we all struggling, we are all working to achieve something better. So you have to know to allow them to know that what ya’ll bring in something new to this world.”

And another participant shared the same view:

“The main focus of the program, even though there was not a curriculum it was to build alliance and show them there is more than just living on the streets. Showing them something new, something they didn’t see before.”

On top of the youth struggling to break poor habits and resist temptation, the youth also struggle with everyday independent living skills. One participant shared that the need for services at a transitional (youth to adult) is needed in our community:

“Transition from high school to adult life is one of the challenges we have. We do a good job as far as getting them from Elementary, Middle, and High schools, but as far as that transition from high school to adulthood is very challenging. They don’t know how to balance a check book, um, some of the essential things that need to be taught have not been translated over. We have some success, but we have a high number of them that struggle. There is not enough funding in that area, not enough support.”

Along with transition programs being barriers, one participant shared the ability for youth in programming to have the skills to be able to break patters very limited:

“I hope that the youth take from this program is the ability to self-govern themselves without is... Self-Govern, meaning, having the ability to make the right decisions, even when peer pressure presents itself. Most of them succumb to peer pressure when they all get together... That is where you see most of them getting in trouble, such as in-school suspension. This is when they all get together and start clowning around.”

Moreover, all participants reported that there is a lack of services in the community that best support youth in breaking generational patterns, as the majority of providers often see their lack skills and competency to utilize those skills as behaviors or avoidant, which often leads to discharge in programming.

Subtheme One: Educational support and engagement with youth

All participants shared the aspect of education being a support to help change the projected intergenerational cycle for many of the youth who are deemed at risk. The reoccurring theme included that education provides change for the future in these young children's lives, education provides an alternative way of thinking and that way out.

“Our educational focus was on building and sustaining their ability to have a better life. So in our program our motto was learn one teach one.”

One participant described educational support as a way for the youth to create a new legacy,

“The future is all encompassing, in regards to education. Kiddos in our program will have access to, um, tutorial programs on Wednesday, um, but the future piece is designed to create a new legacy for the families and participants.”

Another participant shared that education helps the youth as they grow as young adults but also for the mentors demonstrating how to be successful through action:

“Giving the kids the ability to see different things and learn culturally helps them relate not only to the mentors but allows them to see others like them, being successful in the community.”

And,

“taking the kids out to do field trips and college visits allows them to see people that resemble them that have been successful, outside of sports.”

Finally, one of the participants shared the meaning of continued training and education for the staff in programming,

“If you can't have a staff in there that looks like the kid provide training. We provide cultural training.”

Subtheme Two: Recreational engagement and support

The second subtheme outlines the importance of recreational activities supporting and honing in on engagement from youth and a source to build resilience in the youth. Participants described how sports reduce stress levels, increase peer interaction and comradery, and build self-worth in the youth. Participants also shared the aspect of how the coaches play a particular

role in recreational activities and how they are the foundation to which many of these youth learn from.

“As we look at those who are in poverty or affected by poverty, often they are over represented with health disparities, and with health issues or health measures. So, for example, African American and Latinos are often affected by high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, things of that nature. And so we use the boxing cardio work out to address those health disparities along with health plans that we introduce them to.”

The same participant also noted,

“Our program is a boxing program, sports alternative program, um, and the goal is to work with at-risk youth and young adults, between the ages of 8 and young adults. There are four areas that we focus on, Faith, Family, Fitness, and Future. We hone in on the fitness aspect of the program to bring in the youth and then use the wrap-around services to support the participants and family to address needed services.”

Another participant shared the importance of sports in their community and how without sports it would be difficult to have youth engaged in programming,

“Recreational can take the kids and students from up out the streets and be able to bring them into a program without recreation would be crazy. Because for one, you are bringing them into a new program which they didn’t know nothing about and you got to be able to feed them with different activities that you got going on. Play sports is one of the ways that you can, ugh, release the activities as negative, positive or however they need to get it out at that moment, that is how they use it as a way out.”

One participant emphasized the importance of sports and the impact that it plays on the youths present and future lives,

“I think that we underestimate the power of sports. I know that when we really first started, it was really difficult because funders, um, and some professionals, really undervalue the components that sports bring to everyday life. They often see sports, or athletes in general as jocks, and that kids just run up and down the court. They really don’t see the other aspects that sports bring, like teamwork, comradery, um, the grit, perseverance, leadership. So all those things that we were talking about that sports brings, help the kids be successful.”

And

“For females, this is really important that close to 90 percent of your Fortune 500 female’s CEO’s, said that sports helped them get to where they were at. Sports have a greater impact on females than males. So that means that females that participate in

sports are more likely not to get pregnant, suffer from low self-esteem... On the boys aspect, it keeps them away from drugs, the NCAA talks about the graduation rate of African American males is really high compared to those that don't participate in sports, so Sports allows you to touch every vignette, in life."

A participant also shared a personal story about the workforce and how some departments look at sports engagement as a strength and an overall deal breaker when trying to get a position,

"I used to work for Home Depot, and when I worked for them I spoke to higher management, and what they said was that they only wanted to hire people with a military background and those that play sports, because they know how to work under pressure. And even working in a profession that we work over you see the turnover really high, but sports prepares you for higher stress levels. If a kid is on the free-throw line, he just got fouled, and they down one, there is a lot of pressure for him to make those free-throws. And so you translate that back to life again, so sports is very, for every traditional program and mentor programs it's hard to find a black male role model for your one to one mentors. But for the team we can have one mentor for every ten, and still have a greater impact. Most guys want to mentor around sports than academic themselves." "Our intent and aim so to promote prosocial activities. It's more likely that there are kids that aren't involved or have access to other kinds of activities."

Finally, several participants noted the importance of coaches having grit, providing a lasting foundation that will build not only the youths ability to follow through with plays, but also building a relationship that sometimes has more influence over the youth than others in their lives,

"What sometimes we fail to see is in sports is that a coach is a teacher, and he has more influence over that kid, sometimes as your more traditional teacher and parent."

It is clear that throughout programming recreational activities and sports help youth with regulating skills, peer interactions, and overall building lasting relationships that matter.

Subtheme Three: Community's involvement to support families

The final subtheme that emerged from the participant's responses was the community's involvement. All participants shared that wraparound services support the youth by providing all-encompassing services and a community that can meet the needs of youth. Often times, participants shared a barrier that there is not enough community engagement. Participants also

shared that there is a barrier or community members and service providers being able to provide accurate services to meet the needs of the youth, particularly, youth of color or of minority status.

“In our program the biggest barrier is, one, a community that does not see a value in a cultural program. Professionals such as teachers and those that work with them that really hinder them from progressing. Sometimes it really seems as though they really sabotage the kids. This year we had a couple kids that didn’t come back to our program because of teachers and coaches, said if they were in our program were not going to make a particular team, and now you see those kids struggling. Sometimes you see people pulling the kid from programming.”

However, even though the community at times struggles to meet the needs of youth, the youth continue to give back to their communities in programming,

“They usually do one or two service things every year, as one of the monthly activities. So they will do things like, in the Spring, the Our Neighbors event, where they plant trees. Christmas time they... they made baskets for kids at the Ronald McDonald house, put them together and then delivered the baskets there, so there is also that emphasis on that pro-social, giving back to the community. It’s trying to generate this sense of, responsibility and to broaden their horizons.”

The aspects of community integration for youth who are deemed at risk need to be unique and multi-faceted. The experiences shared by the participants who work within the community provided great insight in building a stronger community to meet the needs of a community with many different cultures.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore what might constitute best practices in after-school programming for youth, ages eight to fourteen, who are considered at-risk. There is limited research connecting aspects of after school programming and youth who are at-risk to support positive engagement with youth. From the participants’ perspectives, their knowledge and involvement when working with youth at-risk really focused on the theme of wraparound services to more fully engage the youth, family, schools, and community. Providing an all-

encompassing service with staff who are competent and trained was described as important. This was also described as something that allows a more authentic relationship with the youth and families and as something that connects them to a caring adult or adults who are engaged: supporting them, and notably, even when struggles arise.

Interpretation of Findings

As the literature points out, there are many potential implications for youth who are deemed at-risk. Anderson (2008) outlined the disenfranchising aspects of racial and ethnic groups such as, poverty, suspensions or early dropout rates, incarcerations, and identity confusions within household structures can account for some of the disparities in these youth's lives. Garnezy (1991) reports that poverty is one of the nation's leading factors in developmental disparities in children. Garnezy goes on to point out that African American children in America are twice as likely than white children to have health disparities that could pose imminent harm or death; three times more likely to be in foster care; and four times more likely to be raised in the social services system. Anderson (2008) goes on to describe the struggles a young black man would face such as him being,

“Strongly identified with violent criminality by skin color alone, the anonymous young black male in public is often viewed first and foremost with fear and suspicion, his counter-claims to propriety, decency, and law-abidingness notwithstanding.”

“The young ghetto male's self-presentation is often consciously off-putting (and) that overpowers positive qualities.” (pg. 3).

Cokley (2007) argued that much of the academic achievement and underachievement for African Americans relates to internalized cultural and racial identity. Cultural and racial identity refers to the belief, attitudes, and feelings one has socially attributed to them. This concept has a

significant impact on those that professionals serve. When working with any population it should be in the best interest of the provider, teacher, coach, and social worker to understand how they, the youth, identify themselves. Anderson (2008) noted that it is unacceptable in school systems not to notice the implications of racial disparities. Garmezy (1991) reported a large portion of the African American population is disadvantaged and disenfranchised in a number of ways.

The participants in this research study spoke to and elaborated several times on the disparities among kids of color and the importance of after-school programming within this population. The participants also spoke powerfully to the impact of mentorship and relationship building with the youth and the communities they live in, particularly encouraging mentorships between adults and young people sharing a racial and/or ethnic identification. Whether matches should be gender-specific was a more mixed finding. Other authors have noted the importance of building a positive lasting relationship with youth to promote guidance and prosocial activities. Bonnie Bernard (1990) similarly noted the importance of a positive caring and supportive adult to provide social cohesiveness within the community for the youth.

A common theme all participants spoke to was the lack of supports for the youth as minority male mentors lack in participation in mentoring. As the participants elaborated on the significance of mentors and mentees having the same racial identity, or at least a broad understanding or knowledge of culture there was a missing piece. One respondent noted, "we are missing adults that look like the kids." There were supports put in place at these organizations for a culturally diverse understanding of the youth they work with. Although it is important to note the cultural importance and influence that one's racial and ethnic identity has in building a relationship, sometimes that does not create the authentic relationship between the two. As summarized in *How Children Succeed*, by Paul Tough, a youth paired with an adult

could be a hit or miss but when one takes into consideration the interest and hobbies of the youth and the mentor it contributes to a sustainable relationship that has a chance of lasting.

Tough also speaks to the importance of structure in these environments as important in creating the motivation to change for the youth. Tough elaborated on a program called the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) organized by David Levin in the Bronx which started out with significant impact on academic achievement for the students in the program. These students were recruited, all black and Hispanic, and all of low-income families. There were significant data suggesting that the majority of these students were drop-outs. This program later went on to re-vamp its programming to build character and strengths for the students to better support coping skills and independent living skills which could carry with them into their adult lives. These changes had positive results on graduation rates.

Another strength to this study was the importance and use of a successful tool. The YPQA (Youth Program Quality Assessment) is a tool used that measures the quality of a youth program and identifies staff training needs. This assessment evaluates the youth experience while attending group projects, workshops, and classes; for the staff it evaluates the professional competencies to strengthen programming. This tool is widely known in the community and when working with youth, however a limitation is that there are not more frameworks or tools used to compare it to.

Strengths and Limitations

There were several strengths to this study. One strength was the ability to interview multiple providers or staff who work within organizations that provide after-school programming. This helped support best practices already used in programming. Having a variety

of providers within the same setting provided enough data to combined to form common themes. A second strength to this research was the ability to have an after school program that was not recreational based or focused. This allowed the research to have a point of comparison, allowing the comparing and contrasting of programs.

Another strength to this study was the importance and use of a successful tool. The YPQA (Youth Program Quality Assessment) is a tool used that measures the quality of youth program and identify staff training needs. This assessment evaluates the youth experience while attending group projects, workshops, and classes; for the staff it evaluates the professional competencies to strengthen programming. This tool is widely known in the community and when working with youth, however a limitation is there is not more frameworks or tools used to compare.

There were also limitations to this study. One limitation of this study was the inability, due to research timelines, to interview youth within these programs. When talking about best practices it is important to define what the youth take away from programming, what they find engaging, what the youths' interests are. That is, I am interested in learning more about what encourages youth to continue coming and participating. I am interested in how youth experience and make meaning of both (1) their participation in these programs, and (2) their mentoring relationships. Although I was unable to interview the youth, I found that the participants interviewed engaged the youth in programming often enough to have the youth's voice be heard, even indirectly in this study, as this was a topic my interviewees spoke to and it was a focus they articulated in the majority of the participants' programming already.

Another limitation to this study was the lack of a second person doing coding (reviewing the data). Such a person could have served as a reliability check. Reliability coding helps the

researcher by providing the opportunity to have another person (or more) code the transcriptions and to similarly compare and contrast findings, with the goal of enlarging the original researcher's perspective in relation to the data. These reliability checks would provide more diversity of interpretation in relation to the coded themes. Due to time constraints and concern for confidentiality, reliability checking was not conducted. It is something to consider in future studies.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research is needed to better understand the value of mentees sharing the gender and same culture, race, or ethnicity of the mentor. This type of research could serve to increase our understanding of how an authentic relationship occurs and developments, giving attention to its "core components" and to the importance of matching gender and/or race from the mentees' perspectives. Existing literature supports the importance of having one caring adult in a youth's life to build resilience, however the importance of matching these additional factors was not addressed in the majority of the articles found.

Historical trauma is similarly an important topic being researched. More data around the implications that historical trauma has on youth and families of color would strengthen this paper. Historical trauma affects everyone, especially those who are served in the after school programs when the majority of these programs look at children of color as risk factor, qualifying them for services. Historical trauma is a complex and sensitive subject; there are many different dynamics that need to be explored.

Summary

This study found that for the youth participating in these after school programs, the best practices identified by respondents included: building an authentic relationship between the

mentors and the mentees, breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, providing positive and supportive educational, recreational, and community supports that best fit the youth and the family's needs. Respondents also consistently spoke to the importance of athletics in teaching "soft skills" (quotes mine) and as important in inculcating adult social skills, such as teamwork. In making these links, these leaders were noting a connection that Putnam (2016) noted in the introduction to this paper. Athletics were identified as something teaching a sense of "grit," too, that authors such as Paul Tough identify in the book "How Children Succeed." Cultural awareness was described as a necessity and was said to be needed in programing. This in itself will build some stronger community connections, allowing these services to benefit the youth and their families, and broader society. The relationships, skills, and supports were all described as important for all youth, and particularly important in mitigating some of the challenges these youth face.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your program and a bit about who you serve.
 - a. Does your programming use a curriculum or “model”?
 - i. Whether or not you do,, what does your program focus on here? That is, are there programming core components?
 - ii. How are youth referred to this program? Self-referred, family, or school?
 - iii. Do you work with youth who are identified as “at-risk” or who exhibit “behavioral challenges” in any way?
 - b. What is your role within programming?
2. What does your program focus on, what goals do you aim to achieve with the youth?
3. What kinds of activities do the youth participate in here?
 - a. If so, what role of importance do you feel the recreational activity serve the youth? That is, what’s important about it above and beyond “regular” programming or things you offer?
 - b. How do you see this carrying forward into their later adolescent or even young adult lives??
4. What often lead the youth to engage in the program?
 - a. What does the youth want to “take or get” from the time within this program.
5. What do you see a barriers for youth to participate in programming?
6. What kinds of things seem to influence program success?
 - a. For instance, when you think of a child or teen who has done really well here, what kinds of things seemed to support them or connected with them here?
7. What ides do you have in terms of how best to engage youth in programming?
 - a. What do you feel your program currently excels in and are there any limitations that you note (young people we need to do a better job of reaching?)?
 - b. How important is “same gender” pairing? (optional question)
 - c. As you think of this program and other similar programs, what are the common unmet needs we should be considering?
8. Do you have any recommendations for other programs on engaging, motivating, and supporting youth in programming?
9. Are there benefits of this programming, of what you do, that you see carrying forward in these youths’ lives, even into their adulthood?
10. Is there anything that this discussion makes you think of that might be worth adding? Is there anything important that I might not have thought to ask?

Appendix B: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS
MINNESOTA**Consent Form*****Best Practices for After-School Programming for At-Risk Youth Ages 8-14 Years Old*****IRBNet Tracking Number**

You are invited to participate in a research study about what best practices are utilized within after-school programming for youth identified as at-risk within the age ranges of 8-14 years old. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you work within an after-school program. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have knowledge related to after-school programming. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Brittany Abdallah, LSW, a graduate student at the School of Social worker within St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas. The research advisor for this research study is Dr. David Roseborough through University of St. Thomas. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to collect data that will contribute in a wealth of knowledge and understanding what best practices are when working with at-risk youth in after-school programming. The data will help identify what best practices are being used in after-school programming and how to support at-risk youth in this setting.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: (1) agree to and sign Consent Form, (2) participate in a 45 - 60 minute interview which will be audio recorded. The questions in the interview will be used in the qualitative research paper and a presentation of findings will occur in May 2016.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The study has no risks.

The direct benefits you will receive for participating are: there are no direct benefits to participating in this research study.

Compensation

There will be no compensation of time provided to participants throughout this research study.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. Once the interview is scheduled the participant can arrange the location, timing, and circumstances of sharing information. Within the interview the participant will be audio record, the audio record will be password protected on the researcher's phone. When transcription occurs the researcher will delete information provided in interview that would identify the participant.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include: audio record of the interview, transcription of the interview. The audio record will be kept on the researcher's phone which has two password protected safeguards. The transcription of the interview will be password protected on the researcher's computer, this also has two password protected safeguards installed. Only this researcher will have access to the audio recordings, and transcriptions. If the research advisor wishes to view or listen to the interview he will be given access to these documents and recordings. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with this researcher, Brittany Abdallah, or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be voided from this research and destroyed. You can withdraw either by phone, email, or text message by informing the researchers of your wishes to discontinue in the research. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask throughout the research process.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Brittany Abdallah You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 507-202-8604 or abda6181@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the research advisor Dr. David Roseborough at 651-962-5804. The University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board number is 651-962-6035 if you need to address questions or concerns, or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date